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ABSTRACT

The American adolescent of the 1980s presents a mixed picture of social and economic trends. Census data on schooling, for example, reveal that the number of 17-year-olds who graduate from high school has remained relatively stable in the last 20 years. On the other hand, the dropout rate persists at the same high level, and racial differences are visible within the dropout rate in many States. Recent youth employment is also mixed: teenage employment figures in general are up over 1960, but they have decreased for black males. Adolescent sexual activity has increased, but adolescent childbirth statistics are declining. Drug abuse seems to be down, yet the numbers are very slippery, as are those regarding mental health. Findings in that area, however, do show that 20% of all people treated for depression are under 18, and that the adolescent suicide rate has doubled between 1960 and 1978 (for all but black females). With the exception of suicide, the statistics taken all together show a decrease in antisocial and personally destructive behavior. Yet there is no cause for complacency: aggregate data mask serious distress in subgroups of the population. (KH)

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COMMON FOCUS
An Exchange of Information about Early Adolescence

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A STATISTICAL PORTRAIT OF AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS

BY

Joan Lipsitz

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Common Focus
an exchange of information about early adolescence

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A Statistical Portrait of American Adolescents

By Joan Lipsitz

The article below is based on the statistical portrait of the American adolescent, which Center for Early Adolescence Director Joan Lipsitz painted in recent testimony before the Crisis Intervention Task Force of the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families. Lipsitz discussed statistical trends and the developmental characteristics of adolescents in the context of several dramatic social changes taking place in the lives of American youth and their families. Her testimony, entitled "Making It the Hard Way: Adolescents in the 1980s," presented what Lipsitz has termed a "very mixed picture that indicates the need for a wide range of programs and policies."

Schooling

We can make of schooling statistics what we will. On the one hand, there is evidence of some stability in the number of American adolescents completing school. For example, according to census data, the percentage of 17-year-olds who graduated from high school has remained remarkably stable over the last 20 years.[1] The proportion of 12- to 16-year-olds who want to pursue post-high-school education has not changed in the past decade.[2]

On the other hand, the dropout rate remains stubbornly persistent, as well. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimates that for every 100 pupils who were in the fifth grade in fall 1972, 99 entered ninth grade in 1976, 89 entered eleventh grade in 1978, and 75 graduated from high school in 1980.[3] However, these aggregate data mask important regional, socioeconomic, and racial differences. For instance, in school year 1980–81, 45.4% of students in Washington, D.C., who had previously been ninth graders did not graduate from high school; in Mississippi, the percentage was 38.2; in Louisiana, 36.6; in Florida, 36.3; and in Georgia, 35.7. But in Iowa the percentage was 15.2; in North Dakota, 15.1; and in Minnesota, 14.[4]

The dropout rate appears to be about the same among black and white 14- to 17-year-olds, around 5.3% in October 1979; for 18- to 21-year-olds, however, the white dropout rate is 15.5% and the black dropout rate is 25.5%.[5]

Figures in Illinois from 1976 show extremely sharp racial differences that are all too familiar in other states. An estimated 13% of all Illinois' 18- to 21-year-olds did not have a high school diploma; but for blacks the dropout rate was close to one-third and for Hispanics the number approached one-half.[6]

Employment

Youth employment data are surprisingly mixed and more positive than anticipated. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately 48% of teenagers had jobs in 1960; in 1979, almost 60% worked. According to NCES, 63% of high school seniors and 42% of sophomores had paying jobs in 1980.[7] Simmons Market Research Bureau in New York

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Research Summaries on Middle-Grade Education Available Free

The Center for Early Adolescence has published three research and resource summaries that focus on issues in middle-grade education. **Discipline and Young Adolescents, The Learning-Disabled Student,** and **Girls, Math, and Science** were written to help close the gap between researchers of early adolescence and education and practitioners who teach in or administer schools for 10- to 15-year-olds. Each publication gives a jargon-free summary of current research and suggests books, audiovisual materials, and other resources. The summaries were produced under a grant from the U.S. Secretary of Education's Discretionary Program.

The Center has a limited supply of the summaries available at no charge. For each summary desired, send a self-addressed, stamped (39 cents postage), business-size envelope to the Center for Early Adolescence. (Write the title of the summary in the lower left-hand corner of the envelope.)

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reports that in 1981, a 16-year-old male was three times more likely to work part-time than in 1960; a teenaged female was 10 times more likely to be working."

Again, we can interpret these figures in various ways. On the one hand, today's youth are clearly not rejecting the work ethic, possibly because of economic necessity, or because they embrace their parents' values, or for both these reasons. In fact, in 1980, 88% of high school seniors said that being successful in their line of work was very important to them, up 4% since 1972, and 84% said finding steady work was very important, up 6%.[9] This is not a picture of an unsocialized, irresponsible, devil-may-care group of adolescents.

On the other hand, at least one-third of all young people will work at fast-food restaurants when they are teenagers, in low-wage, tedious, dead-end, and sometimes dangerous jobs.[10] For some adolescents, numerous hours of work may lead to lowered grades, greater occupational deviance, and other disturbing behavior.[11] And much more troubling are the statistics about black youth. The proportion of black teenagers in the work force decreased from 45% in 1960 to 41% in 1979. For black males, the decrease is marked, from 44% to 30%. Hispanic teenagers appear to be faring better. In 1979, 50% of Hispanic teenagers held jobs.[12]

Sexual Activity

Evidence indicates an increase in sexual activity among adolescents but a downward trend in adolescent childbearing. In 1960 the birthrate per 1,000 women aged 15 to 19 was 89.1. That number has steadily decreased. In 1975 it was 52.4.[13] But "while the teenage birthrate has been declining, the incidence of out-of-wedlock births among teenagers has been increasing. In 1978, over one-half of all births to teenagers were to women who were unmarried, compared to 17% in 1960."[14] In addition, while births to older teenagers are declining, births to younger teenagers increased, as of 1978. (They appear to have decreased subsequently. If so, this is the first good news we have had about pregnancy in girls under 15 in two decades.)[15]

The death rate among mothers from complications during pregnancy and childbirth is 13% greater for 15- to 19-year-olds than for women in their twenties. For teenagers under age 15, the death rate is 60% greater.[16] In general, teenagers are more likely to suffer from maternal and infant mortality and morbidity. Also, "so strong is the relationship between teenage pregnancy and financial dependency that researchers at the Urban Institute estimate that each year a woman delays her first birth, the probability that she will be in poverty at age 27 is reduced by about two percentage points."[17]

The statistics in the table below are of great interest. Despite the many differences of opinion about sexual values, most adults agree that they would like girls to delay sexual activity, to avoid becoming pregnant, not to be early childbearers, and to delay marriage. Adults would like children to be spared infection by sexually-transmitted diseases. Today's picture, however, is of an age group making early, vital decisions about life-enhancing and life-threatening issues.

Sexual Activity Among Unmarried Teenagers*[18]

Age	13	14	15	16	17	18
Males	12	24	35	45	52	70
Females	2	11	20	32	44	52

*Given in percents

Substance Abuse

A 1982 survey of 17,700 high-school seniors, conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan on behalf of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, found that regular use of marijuana has dropped back to its 1975 level. Regular use of alcohol and tobacco also seems to be in a steady decline. Yet, the figures are not reassuring. Twenty-nine percent of seniors reported having used marijuana in the past month (the figure was 37% in 1978 and 1979), and 6% said they used marijuana daily.[19]

These figures are very slippery. Every study yields different numbers—but the same trends. The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, which surveys American households every two or three years, reported that from 1979 to 1982, 12- to 17-year-olds showed a dramatic decline in current use of marijuana, from a survey high in 1979 of 16.7% to 11.1%. For 12- to 17-year-olds, the percentage reporting ever having used marijuana was down from 30.9% to 27.3%. Note that among 18- to 25-year-olds, the decline was smaller.[20] The drug-abusing cohort is growing older and is evidently more resistant to outside influence.

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Joan Lipsitz, Director • **ADVISORY BOARD:** *Walter Allen*, Center for Afroamerican and African Studies, University of Michigan • *Robert Wm. Blum*, University Hospital Adolescent Health Program, Minneapolis • *John Butler*, Children's Hospital Medical Center, Boston • *John Calhoun*, National Crime Prevention Council • *Richard deLone*, Urban Affairs Consultant • *Marian Wright Edelman*, Children's Defense Fund • *Pablo Eisenberg*, Center for Community Change • *Glen Elder*, Professor of Sociology, UNC • *James J. Gallagher*, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, UNC • *Frances D. Hooks*, NAACP • *Harold Howe II*, Harvard Graduate School of Education • *Joan R. Ligursi*, Trans Global Films • *Arturo Madrid*, Tomas Rivera Center, Claremont Graduate School • *Richard Magat*, The Hazen Foundation • *C. Arden Miller*, Maternal and Child Health, School of Public Health, UNC • *M. Hayes Mizell*, Division of Employment and Training, SC • *Robert L. Navarro*, Entex, Inc. • *Lori Orum*, National Council of La Raza • *Karl Stauber*, Economic Development, Inc. • *Rachel Tompkins*, West Virginia University • *John B. Turner*, School of Social Work, UNC • *Mildred Kiefer Wierf*, Girls Clubs of America • *David F. Wynn*, Boys Clubs of America

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Cigarette smoking also declined dramatically among high-school seniors. Around 21% reported daily use and 30% occasional use, down from a high of almost 29% daily use, and lower even than the 1975 figure of almost 27%.[21] These figures are more interesting when the percents for males and females are looked at separately:

Adolescents Smoking One or More Cigarettes per Week*[22]

Age		Year 1968	1979
12–14	Male	2.9	3.2
	Female	0.6	4.3
15–16	Male	17.0	13.5
	Female	9.6	11.8
17–18	Male	30.2	19.3
	Female	18.6	26.2

*Given in percents

Although percentages are going down, the numbers are still high. Thus the average 12-, 13-, 14-, or 15-year-old is not shielded from the possibility of harm; and young adolescents are making crucial decisions about risk-taking behavior, sometimes daily.

Mental Health

Despite the availability of some scattered statistics, it is almost impossible to compile mental health figures with accuracy, precision of definition, and age comparability. The President's Commission on Mental Health (1978) estimates that 16% of the population under 18 will need mental health services.[23] Figures for 3- to 15-year-olds are estimated at anywhere from 5 to 15%.[24] Twenty percent of all people treated for depression are under 18 years of age.[25]

The Children's Defense Fund reports that two out of three seriously disturbed children and adolescents do not receive any mental health services, and that those young people least likely to receive appropriate and timely mental health care are "disturbed adolescents, especially those with serious or multiple problems and those who have been in hospital or may face hospital placement."[26]

From 1960 to 1978, adolescent suicides among 15- to 19-year-olds doubled for all but black females.[27] During the 1980s, teenagers have had the fastest growing suicide rate of any age group.[28] The incidence of adolescent suicide is twice as great for whites as for blacks, three to four times greater for boys than for girls.[29]

Suicide Deaths Per Million Persons Aged 15–19*[30]

		1960	1970	1975	1978
White adolescents	Male	59	94	130	138
	Female	16	29	31	34
Black adolescents	Male	34	54	70	75
	Female	15	29	21	16

Sometimes, adolescents run away from home rather than from life. According to the National Network of Runaway and Youth Services, more than two million young people annually run away.

Some are running from abuse. Child abuse statistics refute several commonly held opinions about who is abused and who abuses. Incidents of reported abuse are distributed rather evenly across age and sex. Younger children are thus not the most common victims. As children become adolescents, the type but not the incidence of abuse changes. Incidents of beatings, severe neglect, multiple injuries, and death decline; but sexual abuse increases, especially for girls.[31] Nor is abuse restricted to one social class. For instance, North Shore University Hospital's Family Crisis Treatment Center in Nassau County, New York, studied 87 suburban households in such townships as Great Neck, Manhasset, and Glen Cove, and found that there was twice as much abuse of adolescents aged 13 to 18 as of younger children. Abuse often began when adolescents started asserting their independence from their parents. "We are seeing families that are intact and affluent," says Dr. Sandra J. Kaplan, Chief of the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and head of the center.[32]

With the exception of adolescent suicide, the statistics show a heartening decrease in antisocial and personally destructive behavior. Yet there is no cause for complacency....

What the Statistics Mean

With the exception of adolescent suicide, the statistics show a heartening decrease in antisocial and personally destructive behavior. Yet there is certainly no cause for complacency about the level of personal and societal pain that forms the reality behind these numbers. Aggregate data mask serious distress in subgroups of the population.

Taken as a whole, the data present a picture of young people who are extremely vulnerable to external influences. If we portray them in the media as pathological, spaced-out, drunken, illiterate thugs, we run the risk of alienating greater numbers of adolescents and of inadvertently encouraging them to fulfill our worst expectations. The statistics on suicide bear eloquent testimony to the vulnerability of adolescents. The other statistics are less eloquent only because we have not learned to hear their signals of distress. Adolescents are all too often victims, and our reluctance to recognize the vulnerability of teenagers is nowhere more evident than in the area of child abuse.

Statistical overviews rarely portray the strengths of an age group. We do not know, for instance, the numbers of adolescents who volunteer in their communities, or the numbers who have excelled academically, artistically, athletically, or vocationally. These important social indicators simply are not available. Perhaps fewer teenagers would be in crisis if they heard and read about their strengths and accomplishments.

The incidence of almost every negative social indicator among adolescents is either horizontal or declining. Adults cannot take all the credit for having caused this turn away

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from the unrelentingly escalating figures of the 1970s. When the size of the youth cohort decreases, so do the alarming statistics. On the other hand, this is a good time to step back and take the credit that is due. Nonetheless, because we succeed in making large numbers of each cohort of youngsters literate never has meant that we should stop teaching the next cohort. It has meant that we must try to identify what has failed or succeeded, with whom, and why, and to extend our efforts to more and more youngsters. The same should hold for our prevention and crisis intervention efforts.

Notes

[1]U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, *U.S. Children and Their Families*, 98th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Author, 1983), p. 22.

[2]Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, pp. 24–25.

[3]National Center for Education Statistics, "School Retention Rates," *Statistical Highlights* (Washington, D.C.: GPO 1981, NCES 81-423).

[4]"Public High School Graduates and Undergraduates," *Education Week*, 3, No. 3 (1983), 15.

[5]National Center for Education Statistics, "School Dropouts, by Age and Race, October 1979," *The Condition of Education* (1981), Table 1.13.

[6]Mark Testa and Fred Wulczyn, *The State of the Child*, The Children's Policy Research Project, Vol. I (Chicago, Ill.. University of Chicago, 1980), p. 100.

[7]Alvin Rosenbaum, *The Young People's Yellow Pages: A National Sourcebook for Youth* (New York: Putnam Publishing Group, 1983), p. 59.

[8]Rosenbaum, p. 41.

[9]Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, p. 41.

[10]Rosenbaum, p. 60.

[11]See, for instance, Mary Ruggiero, Ellen Greenberger, Laurence D. Steinberg, "Occupational Deviance among Adolescent Workers," *Youth and Society*, 13, No. 4 (1982), 423–48; Laurence D. Steinberg, Ellen Greenberger, Laurie Garduque, and Sharon McAuliffe, "High School Students in the Labor Force: Some Costs and Benefits to Schooling and Learning," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 4 (1982), 363–72.

[12]Rosenbaum, p. 59.

[13]Testa and Wulczyn, pp. 26–27.

[14]Ibid., p. 29.

[15]Ibid., p. 28.

[16]Ibid., p. 29.

[17]Ibid., p. 31.

[18]The Alan Guttmacher Institute, *Teenage Pregnancy: The Problem That Hasn't Gone Away* (New York: The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1981), p. 7.

[19]"Drug Use Down—But Not Out—Among High School Seniors," *Report on Education Research*, 15, No. 4 (1983), 9.

[20]New York State Division for Youth, *Alternatives*, No. 508 (June 1983), 1.

[21]"Drug Use Down," p. 9.

[22]Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, p. 39.

[23]Rosenbaum, p. 167.

[24]President's Commission on Mental Health, *Report of the Task Force Panel on Prevention*, Vol. 4 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1978) pp. 1822–63.

[25]Rosenbaum, p. 167.

[26]Jane Knitzer, *Unclaimed Children: The Failure of Public Responsibility to Children and Adolescents in Need of Mental Health Services* (Washington, D.C.: Children's Defense Fund, 1982), p. x.

[27]Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, p. 40.

[28]Rosenbaum, p. 167.

[29]Testa and Wulczyn, p. 76.

[30]Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, p. 40.

[31]Testa and Wulczyn, p. 67.

[32]"Child Abuse in Suburbia Refutes some Common Notions," N.Y. State Division for Youth, *Alternatives*, No. 461 (March 1983), 1.

New Publications on Middle-Grade Education

Bulk quantities of three pamphlets that will help parents guide the middle-grade education of their young adolescent children are now available from the Center.

Talking With Young Adolescents About School, School Environments for Young Adolescents, and **Curriculum and Instruction in Junior High and Middle Schools** explain the rapid changes that occur in early adolescence and the appropriate ways in which schools adapt to this age group. Emphasizing the importance of school in the lives of 10- to 15-year-olds, the three pamphlets assist parents in discussing school with their children, teachers, and school administrators. Additional resources also are suggested.

Single copies are available to organizations for review. Send a stamped, self-addressed, business-size envelope, marked "Pamphlets for Parents," to Dorothy Casey at the Center.

At a time when the public, researchers, and policymakers are losing confidence in public schools, **Successful Schools for Young Adolescents** offers solutions and concrete models of diverse ways in which excellence can be attained in middle-grade schools. In this study supported by the National Institute of Education, Center Director Joan Lipsitz offers a new framework for identifying and examining effective middle-grade schools—one that takes into account adolescent development, school effectiveness research, and public policy concerns. A major problem in schooling, Lipsitz notes, is meeting the massive individual differences in the development of young adolescents. She presents case studies of four schools that foster both healthy development and academic achievement.

Thomas J. Sergiovanni, Lillian Radford Distinguished Professor of Education at Trinity University, San Antonio, said, "This work is particularly outstanding. It is the most meaningful description of school effectiveness I've seen—a credit to quality research, qualitative research, and a remarkably insightful writing style."

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